

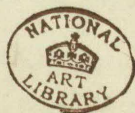
S. A. Berr
Cirencester
Box VI, 97. E. Box. 0186

CIRENCESTER SCHOOL OF ART.

Annual Distribution of Prizes, Feb. 23rd, 1869.

ADDRESS BY PROFESSOR CHURCH, M.A.

I should be glad to be allowed, in saying a few words to you to-night on the subject of Art, to ramble about a little in this wide domain. Only three days ago did I hear that I might perhaps be of some use here this evening, and since then my ordinary work has not permitted me to prepare such an address as would have satisfied your expectations and my wishes. Excuse then, I beg, my presumption in speaking at all in this place. Let my interest in Art and my desire to help, in any way at all possible to me, on such an occasion as this, be my excuse for standing before you and giving you, for a few minutes, some desultory talk. 1st. I would take up then as they come into my mind a few subjects of artistic moment about which I have often thought. First among these stands the relation of science to art—its help and its interference more particularly being in my view just now. It has often happened that the period in a nation's history when art has attained its greatest perfection has not been distinguished for special moral excellence, or large literary achievement. Chinese colour is most lovely, its combinations and modes of application afford splendid examples of refinement of taste, yet the stereotyped character of Chinese civilization is a bye-word in Europe. In North Africa, again, we have several rough and half-civilized tribes possessed of a style of ornament which both as to design and colour is worthy, I will not say of imitation merely, but of the deepest study. A bit of Arabic inlay, such as some of the Meymar specimens just added to the South Kensington Museum, or a plate of Persian faience will shew us that we must not disdain to learn from peoples far behind us in general civilization—who knew less, and certainly talked less than we do, but who seem to have felt more, and commonly achieved, in some art directions, greater successes than are usual amongst us. Looking back 300 years, we find in Western Europe the splendid structures of Mediæval architecture, from A.D. 1200 to 1500, together with the perfect products of many kindred arts, coeval with a state of society, of feeling, and of general knowledge which in some points was absolutely barbaric. Was it then, I want to ask, the growth of science and the spirit of philosophic inquiry which deadened art then, or must we look to our own era before we can trace any great influence of this kind? I ask this question not because I can here answer it completely, but because it gives me the opportunity of mentioning one point of contact between science and art which leads often, in individual cases, to distinct failure. You know that men of science, who are always questioning nature and learning her secrets, can now do, at their will, and more perfectly than before, many things which men knew not the reason of formerly, and which came as it were haphazard, and now and then to the earlier workers. Take an example. When the great French potter Bernard Palissy was at work (he died in 1590), no knowledge of the real nature and affinities of the materials of pottery, its colours and glazes, was to be got. He struggled through years of experiments and years of disappointment, and achieved at last a success of no inconsiderable sort. During the last hundred years or more every problem that puzzled Palissy in glazing his ware has been solved by science. Invention and processes and improvements may even have been too abundant. Our manufacturers and those of Europe have done great things: but the ware may be perfect in texture and durability, the colours may be pure and bright as those of flowers, the glaze may have the polish of a jewel, but if there be lacking the artistic spirit to imbue the exquisitely prepared body with true life, the finest porcelain-paste, and enamels, and glazes are worse than



dead. Those old potters whose works are now-a-days preserved as precious, did not invent their materials first, and then begin to think of design and colour: the idea of the form and the ornament had wrought itself into order, and then were sought by long continued trials materials which should give it substance and adequately represent it. Now a chemist, or experimenter, or manufacturer invents a new glaze, and must needs daub it over everything—he makes the vessels to show off the wonderful new glaze, and not the glaze that it may enhance the beauty of the vessels. (See, as example, the Belleek porcelain). Science has brightened our colours, too; but lay on bright chemical pigments thick as you can, glaze them with the juiciest of glazes, and if feeling and art be wanting, science has not advantaged you but done you harm. Most modern majolica with its brilliant hues gives you no satisfaction after you have seen it once or twice, while of the old Italian pieces with their subdued harmonies of, it may be, poor colours, you never tire. In Josiah Wedgwood you have an illustrious example of a man who pressed into the service of his manufacture all the resources of science; and yet so used them that they served only to exalt the artistic merit of his productions. For to Wedgwood's wares chemistry gave the right composition, while mechanical skill gave truth and perfection of texture and form. By countless trials under scientific guidance Wedgwood improved his materials, not to display them as such, but in order worthily to represent the lovely designs of Flaxman and to reproduce the beauty of antique art. I have given you illustrations of the way in which science may help or endanger art: hundreds might be cited from painting or from architecture, where especially, mathematical precision and mechanical hardness are often quite fatal to beauty of effect; but I must rest content with having directed your thoughts to a question of such great importance as the right attitude of science to art. 2nd. I am naturally led to say a few words now on another topic, intimately connected with the last. We have seen, or may infer that improvements in manufacture arising from increased knowledge of the intimate properties of the materials used may often aid and often damage art. If, for example, you make all your pigments pure and bright, you may have no repose as the result—what we may name temperance of colour may become impossible or difficult. Use but do not lavish the gifts that scientific progress offers. Take a Persian dish as an example. On a white ground is a beautiful arabesque of conventional ornaments from leaves and flowers. The designer used four colours only, a pale greenish blue like the turquoise, a deep rich blue, a grey like Indian ink, and lastly a red—a peculiar tint—very dull and very dirty, not quite unlike that of a halfpenny stick of very bad sealing-wax or a poor sort of red lead. But this colour must not be brightened: only let a scientific man come in and suggest and substitute the last new chemical red, let him take the dullness out of the red and the beauty is taken out of the whole combination of colour. And then the Indian ink colour, a smoke colour, is on these Persian plates for a similar reason. Often their borders have besides ornaments in colour, hundreds of little spiral curls of grey, giving at once quietness and solidity to the edge or frame, and thus brightening the central design of the piece. Temperance in colour does not indeed mean dullness and dowdiness of colour: it means proper relief, combination, and modification of colour. Let some of those rarer tints be introduced among your blues and reds and yellows, which you cannot exactly name but which the watchful student of nature may see trembling on the leaves of the willow, or paving the autumn paths of the forest, or shining at sundown from the depths of the sky. 3rd. I hardly like to take up the third point about which I had wished to speak to-night: it would demand for proper treatment many illustrations and examples, and far more time than is now at our disposal. The adaptation of natural forms to ornament is a wide subject, and our Schools of Art have accomplished already a noble work in diffusing juster notions of the meaning of ornament and decoration. Our manufacturers will persist I know in producing paper-hangings, and chintzes, and carpets, of designs which where they are not revoltingly ugly are completely out of place and incongruous. But you can get a few good things now while not many years ago it was impossible. Still we see paper-hangings which imitate granite and precious marbles put upon walls where even the real materials represented would be at least inappropriate even if they could possibly be placed there. The other day I noticed in a shop a deal partition not an inch thick, papered to represent solid grey granite, and consequently of the presumed weight of some tons: how exquisitely inappropriate such an

imitation is even if the practice of attempting such imitations be permissible. But the most prevalent and at the same time the most seductive form of false decoration is the direct representation of natural objects, especially plants and animals, with light and shadow, for the adornment of flat surfaces. I shall be met here with the rejoinder, "Are not all pictures such representations and imitations?" They are and usually ought to be. But pictures and decorations are distinct. Give as much roundness and atmosphere and depth and intricate detail and complex colour to your picture as you will, but do not cover your walls with 500 repetitions of it. You would not do this: it would be too absurd to hang up 500 copies of Millais's "Order of Release" in your drawing room; and is it not quite as ridiculous to put up a paper with 5,000 similar rosebuds on it, all exactly alike, and all casting the same shadow whether the light of the window came from one side or the other of the bud? To cover a wall with ornament, you must go to nature and adopt some of her lovely forms, but as it is not every workman who can really imitate exactly, and as all materials and all fabrics are not adapted for similar decoration, so, in using natural forms for decoration, you must pursue some system. A carpet weaver imitating roses has to contend with the difficulties which the nature of his material and the method of its manufacture involve. But, attempting to imitate, in his own way, the natural form of the plant, he leaves out what should be kept, and keeps what should be left out. The essential features of the flower have been lost, its accidental characters probably retained. It has become false in the very attempt to represent it truly. But let any one dissect the flower and learn its distinctive characters, rejecting what is accidental and keeping what is essential, a beautiful decorative and not an imitative form is obtained, quite true to the spirit of nature. You may decorate your floors with such forms, and yet not think that you are crushing and ruining beautiful flowers by your tread. So also with your walls and paper hangings; you may adorn them with forms adapted from those of nature, and suggesting to you, more or less distinctly, the forms and characters and colours of your favourite flowers, but not trying unsuccessfully, of course, to look like bouquets and blossoms of living plants stuck unsupported against the wall. Ornaments on your flat walls so as to keep them flat—don't destroy that most important character—for thus you will be able to display upon them with full effect your works of pictorial and realistic art. If you intend to display no such works, then your wall paper may be less sharply kept down to the essential forms of natural objects, and you may permit yourself fuller details and greater latitude of treatment both in form and colour. Thus this adaptation of natural forms for decorative purposes, which is often termed *conventionalizing*, may differ in degree according to the object in view and the material to be used. The form that will be exquisite if carved in wood will not be suitable for engraving on glass; nor will that which is adapted for colour printing on paper be proper for weaving into the texture of a carpet. Our conventionalizing is in fact an agreement to keep the essential and cast away the accidental characters of the natural objects which we employ, and it is modified by the material we work in and the purpose to which our manufacture is to be applied. When you conventionalize a flower you preserve the characteristics of the plant more or less completely, not the peculiarities of any individual blossom. 4. I have spoken of the attitude of science to art, of temperance in colour, and of the nature of ornament. I ought to add something concerning our special duties as Cirencester people, and of the special work of the Cirencester School of Art. I do not doubt that a school of applied science such as that to which I have the honour to belong, and a School of Art such as that which is flourishing in this town, exercise a wider influence than may be generally imagined. Such institutions bring out in many individuals latent powers quite unexpected, and which would otherwise have remained idle. They appeal by the industry and enthusiasm of their members to the general public; such is specially the case with a School of Art. Many study in such schools not merely to improve their position and power in their several walks of life, but to improve and ennoble their mental and moral qualities. The appreciation of beauty is a gift, but it may be cultivated. It is a talent, but because it is not as weighty as some other talents have we any business to lay it up in a napkin and bury it? I see in the drawings in this hall many an evidence of taste cultivated, of the talent of artistic feeling put out to usury and yielding excellent interest. I see mastery over colour and form. I see thoughtfulness, and perseverance, and accuracy. I see signs of an open mind, ready to learn, ready to drink in from every source the nourishment of the artistic

soul. Our Art School should be the centre and life of our art interests here. We have architectural and archaeological memorials in Cirencester of high interest. I should like to see studies of our old buildings, of the stained glass and wall decoration of neighbouring churches, of some of the best objects of ornament in our Romano-British Museum. I should like to see in this room studies of the beautiful scenery of Sapperton and Nailsworth, or Malmesbury Abbey with its ornamental details, and the Market Cross. I should like to see an effort made to improve the only artistic manufacture of our district—that of lace. For this you want better designs, a museum of examples, good light workrooms, and then the poor lace-workers, who now earn, I am told, but one farthing per hour, will do better work and enjoy some few more elements of life's happiness. I should like to see public evening lectures on science, popular, simple, thorough, started by the College, but given during winter evenings in the town. We ought also to have an art loan collection here. Possessors of splendid works of art are happily beginning to see that they hold them in trust, that the pleasure and benefit they afford to others are something to be more glad of than their mere possession. South Kensington will help us, our wealthy friends and neighbours will help us, and we might have an exhibition for a few weeks of hundreds of artistic objects, properly explained in a catalogue, and doing good in many ways to the inhabitants of the whole district. We must not wander through such a museum of art in an imbecile and curious mood. We must earnestly study to gather some seeds of fructifying power from the memorials of the past for the work of the future. A rare treat such collections are to those who cannot hope to possess great artistic objects for daily study, though even a good print or a decorative piece of glass, or carving, or inlay, or metal work is within our reach at a cost of two or three shillings. Art ennobles, not only the student and the artist, but the mere beholder of artistic works, if only he will think a little and learn a little about the real nature and functions of the several kinds of art. The round of our daily occupations is apt to become, with some of us at least, dull, and mechanical, and dreary; we need something more to satisfy our longings than mere everyday duties. Bring these duties themselves before you in their right light in the grand order of the world, and you will have done something, but cultivate your other powers as well. Let your eye learn to discover beauties of form and intricate delights of colour; help others to enjoy what you appreciate; simple as our homes may be, let us get rid of what is false and meaningless, let us gather into our houses forms of beauty, let us put on our tables boughs and sprays of God's trees and the mosses and violets which He has made so lovely, let us cease to consider eating and drinking and frivolous talk, and even our own lawful toil, to the exclusion of the recreative study of order and of beauty in nature and in art.

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